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Effective professional development strategies of English language teachers

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining what ‘professional development’ means in ELT teachers’ perspectives and which professional development strategies they prefer using in their teaching career. As to the methodology, the researcher prepared a questionnaire including three open- ended questions responded by 50 language teachers. The results were analyzed through descriptive statistics. The findings showed that the majority of ELT teachers are aware of the necessity of the term ‘professional development’; however, only %30 of the participants give importance to their on-going professional development by using mainly such strategies as participatory practitioner research, professional development portfolios, study groups, and so on.

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Keywords: Professional development; peer-coaching; study groups; action research; mentoring; teaching portfolios; in-service training; team teaching.

1. Introduction

Professional development has been defined in various ways such as:

- It is an inclusion of in-service training and workshops.
- It is a process in which teachers work under supervision to gain experiences.
- It is an ongoing learning process in which teachers primarily aim at how to teach in accordance with the expectations and needs of the students.

It seems vividly that this term does not refer to only one concept, yet it includes many different principles, which is possible to be listed as follows (Clarke, 1994; Clarke, 2001; Clarke, 2003):

- Involve groups of teachers rather than individuals from a number of schools, and enlist the support of the school and district administration, students, parents and the broader school community.
- Recognise and address the many impediments to teachers’ growth at the individual, school and district level.

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- Using teachers as participants in classroom activities or students in real situations, model desired classroom approaches during in-service sessions to project a clearer vision of the proposed changes.
- Allow time and opportunities for planning, reflection, and feedback in order to report successes and failures to the group, to share “the wisdom of practice,” and to discuss problems and solutions regarding individual students and new teaching approaches.
- Enable participating teachers to gain a substantial degree of ownership by their involvement in decision-making and by being regarded as true partners in the change process.
- Recognise that change is a gradual, difficult and often painful process, and afford opportunities for ongoing support from peers and critical friends.
- Encourage teachers to set further goals for their professional growth.

This paper aims at explaining what ‘professional development’ means in ELT teachers’ perspectives, listing effective professional development strategies such as peer-coaching, study groups, action research, mentoring, teaching portfolios, in-service training, and team teaching, and presenting the findings of a study done on professional development and effective professional development strategies used by English language teachers.

2. Effective Professional Development

The components of effective professional development has been approached from different perspectives. To illustrate, Day (1999) reported seven common ingredients of successful professional development, which are inspiration (sharing visions), exposition, discussion, opportunities for cross reference of standards, training in new skills, opportunities to experiment, and coaching. On the other hand, Adey (2004, p.194) proposed 14 factors necessary for effective professional development as seen in the following:

1. The Innovation
 - 1a. has an adequate theory base
 - 1b. introduces methods for which there is evidence of effectiveness
 - 1c. is supported with appropriate high quality materials
2. The PD program
 - 2a. is of sufficient length and intensity
 - 2b. uses methods which reflect the teaching methods being introduced
 - 2c. includes provision for in-school coaching
3. Senior management in the school (s)
 - 3a. are committed to the innovation
 - 3b. share their vision with the implementing department leaders
 - 3c. institute necessary structural change to ensure maintenance
4. The teachers
 - 4a. work in a group to share experiences
 - 4b. communicate effectively amongst themselves about the innovation
 - 4c. are given an opportunity to develop a sense of ownership of the innovation
 - 4d. are supported in questioning their beliefs about teaching and learning
 - 4e. have plenty of opportunity for practice and reflection

Although the factors are varying, what is certain is that English language teachers are in need of effective professional development to keep pace with the rapidly changing and developing educational setting.

3. Effective Professional Development Strategies

3.1. *Peer-Coaching*

Peer coaching is based on reciprocal visits of two teachers whereby they provide each other with feedback and advice about their teaching. In peer coaching, each teacher acts as both the coach and the coachee, which creates sustainability and reduces the cost of training by involving each participant as an equal partner in the process. Thorn et al. (2007) proposes many benefits of peer coaching as follows:

- Reduce isolation among leaders
- Establish collaborative norms
- Build a shared knowledge base
- Share successful practices
- Encourage reflective practice
- More cohesive organizational culture

Due to being a professional dialogue, it supplies supportive and developmental context for the teachers, which is beneficial for especially language teachers who need to learn and use new language items and cultural practices.

3.2. *Study Groups*

Study groups consist of a number of teachers and administrators tending to exchange ideas, plan lessons, analyze students' works and even discuss school policy (Murphy, 1992), so these groups form their interactions around scripts or agendas called protocols (Birchak et al., 1998). The discussions can be of great importance in terms of leaning about other teachers' teaching methods and strategies and reflecting the effective ones to their own classrooms. However, such key notions are to be paid some attention as the size of the groups (ideally six people for each group), the frequency and regularity of the meetings, the necessity of group leaders and representatives and so forth (Joyce & Showers, 1995); otherwise, it can turn into a mess rather than a collaborative and coherent educational setting.

3.3. *Action Research*

Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research (Ferrance, 2000). In this way of professional development, teachers and principals work on the problems they have identified for themselves by helping each other collaboratively. Thus, some useful guidelines in the following should be followed by the participants in action research:

- Select your setting,
- Identify what you want to evaluate
- Select or design your data collection procedure
- Collect the data
- Analyze these findings with reference to your original purposes (Nunan, 1992, p.4)

3.4. *Mentoring*

Mentoring is a form of personal and professional partnership which generally involves a more experienced practitioner supporting a less experienced one who is usually new to the job, organization or profession (Butcher, 2002). Mentoring calls for mentors to be masters of certain standard practices including such abilities as:

- Observe lessons analytically
- Make explicit their craft knowledge,
- Give appropriate and useful feedback on teaching
- Notice and take advantages of learning opportunities
- Set suitable targets for mentee development
- Assess and analyze a teacher's strengths and weaknesses (Malderez & Bodóczy, 1999; Fletcher, 2000)

3.5. *Teaching Portfolios*

Teaching portfolio can be helpful for teachers' professional development in terms of course planning and preparation, actual teaching presentation, evaluation and feedback provision process, and currency in the field (Seldin, 1993). Thus, Edgerton et al. (1991) describe portfolios as follows:

- Portfolios provide documented evidence of teaching that is connected to the specifics and contexts of what is being taught.
- They go beyond exclusive reliance on student ratings because they include a range of evidence from a variety of sources such as syllabi, samples of student work, self-reflections, reports on classroom research, and faculty development efforts.
- In the process of selecting and organizing their portfolio material, faculty think hard about their teaching, a practice which is likely to lead to improvement in practice.
- In deciding what should go into a portfolio and how it should be evaluated, institutions necessarily must address the question of what is effective teaching and what standards should drive campus teaching practice.
- Portfolios are a step toward a more public, professional view of teaching. They reflect teaching as a scholarly activity.

3.6. *In-service Training*

In-service training is described as a planned event, series of events or extended program of accredited or non-accredited learning in order to differentiate it from less formal in-school development work and extended partnerships and inter school networks (Day, 1999). As Özen affirms, swift changes happen to be in today's world and, as professionals, teachers should keep up with these rapid progress. Therefore, these programs are good at providing teachers with the opportunity to gain insight into teaching experiences, reflect on classroom practice and cope with change and divergence (Hiep, 2001).

3.7. *Team Teaching*

Team teaching includes a group of teachers working together in a purposeful, regular and cooperative fashion to teach a group of students. Teachers together set goals for a course, design a syllabus, prepare individual lesson plans, teach students and evaluate the results, which leads to more interaction between the teachers (Buckley, 1998). If the implementation of team teaching follows certain steps like planning, conducting and evaluating, the efficacy can be increased to a great extent.

4. **Methodology**

This study was based on a survey of English language teachers who are believed to have relevant experience with professional development strategies in their academic lives.

4.1. *Subjects*

The subjects in this study were 50 English language teachers working in preparatory schools of universities in North Cyprus. The teachers' ages ranged from 24- to 46- years –old with an average of 35. While they are mostly Turkish or Turkish Cypriots (38 in number), some of them are American, British and Australian (12 in number). Thirty of the teachers hold B.A degree and fifteen of them have Master's degree and five of them pursue their Ph.D studies. The population of the study consists of 39 females and 11 males.

4.2. *Research Questions*

The study aims to find out answers to the research questions as follows:

1. Do you think that professional development is important?

2. Do you give enough significance to your own professional development?
3. Which strategies do you employ for your effective and continuous professional development (e.g. peer coaching, study groups, action research, mentoring, teaching portfolios, in-service training, team teaching)?

4.3. Instruments

The researcher prepared a questionnaire as an instrument for this survey study. The questionnaire consisted of two yes/ no types of questions and one optional question. The questionnaire also included a personal information part thereby the researcher learned more about the participants' ages, genders, educational background, nationality and so on. Also, a blank space was provided for the teachers so that they could state their further ideas.

4.4. Analysis of the Data

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and to find answers to each research question (see below), the frequency and percentage of responses were computed.

Table 1. Teacher responses regarding questions 1-2.

Questions	Frequency	Percentage
Q1	42	84%
Q2	22	44%

This table shows that while the majority of English language teachers (84%) consider professional development as an important part of their profession, only 22 of them stated that they give enough importance to their own professional development. They put forward some impediments to their effective professional development that are time allocation, heavy work schedule, strict working hours, funding, lack of communication among staff, lack of motivation, lack of support from administrative units.

When it comes to the strategies used for professional development, the following table reveals the results:

Table 2. Responses to question 3

Professional development strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Peer-coaching	6	4%
Study groups	14	9.3%
Action Research	19	12.7%
Mentoring	21	14%
Teaching Portfolios	34	22.7%
In-service Training	42	28
Team Teaching	14	9.3%
Total	150	100

As to the third question, it is seen that English language teachers mainly prefer or experience *mentoring, teaching portfolios, in-service training* as professional development strategies. The others remain minority in number, which implies that lack of collaboration is a fundamental barrier in their professional development because the strategies requiring communication and collaboration are preferred at very low rate. Furthermore, they affirmed that the frequency of in-service training is not as many as they expect, but even these infrequent trainings are popular among the language teachers. Another finding is that there is an inclination to be mentored, in other words, to be supervised by more experienced teachers. As has been indicated in the table, study groups and team teaching share the same rate which is 14%.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this study, English language teachers' perceptions about what professional development strategies they prefer using were investigated. It was found out that collaborative activities are generally neglected by language teachers with the exception of mentoring. It was also seen that they do not want to be involved in peer coaching, which reveals that, as Cosh (1999) states, this can be detrimental both to teacher confidence and to a supportive environment. However, Cordingley (2005) compared results of sustained and collaborative professional development with sustained but non-collaborative professional development and found that individual PD had a weaker effect on teachers and students. Moreover, Hutchison (2003) reports that there is a need to endure that group works are effective in classroom and educational context and emphasizes that group work needs to be embedded in pedagogy and planning to maximize the effect of continuous professional development. On the other side, Kelchtermans (2004) highly suggests the significance of the mediation between the teachers and the provider and adds that the reflective, thoughtful decisions and actions of professional development providers as they are doing their job are worth of greater emphasis in effective professional development. In brief, lack of communication, interaction and collaboration influence the preferences of English language teachers' professional development strategies, so more attention and importance should be allocated for more effective professional development.

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